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DE RUEHKE #0185/01 0461548
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 151548Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY KINSHASA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5614
INFO RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

UNCLAS KINSHASA 000185

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SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ETRD](#) [KDEM](#) [CG](#)
SUBJECT: ANDRE KASONGO ILUNGA, R.I.P.

REF: KINSHASA 140

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Trade minister Kasongo Ilunga was one of the many unknowns named to the DRC cabinet February 5. A true non-entity, he left the political scene this week with a singular flourish that has humiliated his political godfather. In fact, he never existed. The episode demonstrates Prime Minister-designate Gizenga's determination to reject candidates with questionable pasts, but also a slapdash vetting process. It also points to the relative unimportance of trade in the current DRC government. End summary.

¶2. (U) Andre Kasongo Ilunga passed from the Congolese political scene this week, only days after being named the first trade minister of the DRC's Third Republic. Nothing befitted his tenure so much as his manner of leaving it. His ministerial colleagues never had the opportunity to get to know him, but he will be remembered for the humor he brought to their conversations and the public humiliation he visited on the outgoing minister of justice.

¶3. (U) Kasongo Ilunga, as he was called by the journalists who knew him best, was an uncommon man with a common name (the Tshiluba equivalent of John Smith). He was one of the Kasai provinces' few representatives in the 60-member cabinet named by President Joseph Kabila and Prime Minister Antoine Gizenga February 5 (reftel). The background information submitted to the prime minister's office portrayed a senior official of the Unafec political party, a minor member of Kabila's AMP electoral coalition which had been allotted one ministerial and one vice-ministerial slot in the post-election carve-out. According to news reports, Kasongo's name was submitted together with that of party president and transitional justice minister Honorius Kisimba Ngoy as Unafec's candidates for the trade post.

¶4. (SBU) In fact, two close associates of Gizenga told us February 14 that Kasongo was a late addition for ministerial consideration, after Gizenga had sent back an initial list proposing Kisimba and Kisimba's son. Gizenga then selected Kasongo after rejecting Kisimba because of the latter's close ties to Mobutu. Kasongo was an unknown when his nomination was announced February 5, but then so were many of his new ministerial colleagues.

¶5. (SBU) Concerns were first raised about Kasongo Ilunga last week when he failed to make an appearance at the first, informal meeting of the council. Gizenga then received a letter from Kisimba stating that Kasongo had written him to say he was resigning as minister for personal reasons. According to the Gizenga associates we spoke with, when staffers subsequently contacted other Unafec officials to inquire about Kasongo they learned that no one had heard from

him. In fact, no one had ever heard of him at all.

¶6. (SBU) The phantom minister, as he is now being called, appears to have been a full-size Frankenstein stitched out of whole cloth by Kisimba Ngoy. It is now clear that when Gizenga rejected Kisimba junior as a ministerial hopeful, Kisimba senior calculated that Gizenga would have no choice but to select Honorius Kisimba Ngoy himself -- a former minister -- over a political unknown with the commonest of names.

¶7. (U) A cartoon in the February 14 edition of the Kinshasa daily "Le Palmares" sums up the hilarity currently making the rounds. Kisimba, dressed in a loud checked suit, looks on with a Cheshire-cat smile as an aide hands Gizenga a letter and tells him "The trade minister has resigned and designated the bearer of this letter as his replacement." Gizenga waves him off, saying "Him!? Yande ve!" -- a Kikongo expression best translated here into Bronxese as "fuhgedabowdit!"

¶8. (U) Kisimba miscalculated badly. Gizenga, a Lumumba associate from the independence era, has been clear in rejecting Mobutuism in all its forms, even continuing to refer to the capital by its original name, Leopoldville. He became known as "Monsieur Yande Ve" in recent weeks for his wholesale rejection of heavyweight ministerial hopefuls with questionable pasts; the literal translation is "not him!"

¶9. (SBU) The incident has made Kisimba the butt of jokes and will mark whatever political future remains to him. He was clearly not paying attention last fall when Gizenga threatened to walk out of a carefully choreographed ceremony solemnizing the AMP electoral coalition by refusing to sit together with Kabila and Mobutu's son Nzanga. This was resolved only when Nzanga agreed to sit alone at the back of the stage while Kabila and Gizenga occupied a ceremonial table far from Nzanga.

¶10. (SBU) Comment. The Kasongo affair has also drawn attention to a slapdash vetting process for ministers. The remaining ministers are real people, to be sure, but many have little or no track record and it is difficult to predict how well they will perform. Moreover, the choice of a literal non-entity as trade minister speaks volumes about the relative unimportance of the portfolio in a country where smuggling could well outweigh legitimate international commerce. The DRC's WTO membership, AGOA eligibility and other trade schemes are perhaps its trade minister's most valuable commodities, as they present regular opportunities for profitable travel abroad. End comment.

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